

# Pfiffner Traverse

## *Part 2: As you go*

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Once in the field, the single most useful resource included with the Pfiffner Traverse Guide is the Mapset. These highly detailed maps are extensively annotated, so that both topographical information and route information are visible with a single glance. For many sections of the route, they can serve as the sole resource, especially for more capable navigators.

Part 2 of the Guidebook is meant to be *complementary* to the Mapset, and *minimally redundant* with it. It contains general information and context, and in-depth explanations for sections that really need it. Intentionally, the text does not consistently provide turn-by-turn directions or minor route notes -- the Mapset serves these functions better. Some readers may long for a more lyrical text, but my chosen system is functionally better.

### **Section 1: Rocky Mountain High**

The northernmost 30 miles of the Pfiffner Traverse are encompassed by Rocky Mountain National Park, which was established in 1915 as America's ninth park. Most visitors experience it by driving between the gateway towns of Estes Park and Grand Lake on Trail Ridge Road (aka US-34), which crosses the Continental Divide at Milner Pass, the northern terminus of the Pfiffner Traverse.

Little time is given to acclimatize, find your trail legs, or eat through some of your food bag before the route gets serious. Within five miles the Pfiffner Traverse has climbed to the summits of Mt. Ida and Chief Cheley Peak (both over 12,800 feet), from where there are far-reaching views in every direction.

The remainder of the route through the park follows a pass-and-valley pattern, which is more engaging than a pure ridgewalk and which affords more opportunities to camp and seek shelter from mountain weather.

South of the North Inlet Trail, the route becomes notably wilder, climaxing with upper Paradise Creek. Rocky Mountain National Park is the fourth most visited park, but you will likely have this remote corner to yourself.

### **Mt. Ida**

From the parking lot at Milner Pass, follow the Ute Trail along the southwest shore of Poudre Lake and into the timber. After climbing up a few switchbacks on good trail for about a half-mile, reach a signed junction. The Ute Trail splits northeast, towards the Alpine Visitor Center. Follow the sign towards Mt. Ida. If the signpost has a laminated warning poster directed at Mt. Ida hikers, take a minute to read it.

The base topographic map does not show the Mt. Ida Trail, so I have overlaid the route onto it. This is my standard practice, i.e. if the base map does not show a man-made trail or depict it accurately, I have added it. However, you should not expect the Mapset to show an exact route for any off-trail

portion of the Piffner Traverse -- I wouldn't want to steal your fun.

**Timber Creek Bypass (north end) ||** For a less intense start, enter at Timber Lake Trailhead and join the Primary Route at either (a) Haynach Pass or (b) atop Mt. Ida. To help acclimate, consider camping along the way. These routes are longer and have more elevation gain, but they are forested and lower in elevation than the Primary Route.

**Beaver Creek Bypass (north end) ||** This (mostly) forested route is a safer alternative than the Primary Route in inclement weather, and is a logistically better option than the Timber Lake Bypass if you must start from or finish at Milner Pass, e.g. your car is parked there. Alternatively, hitchhike between Milner Pass and the Timber Creek Trailhead at the start or finish of your hike.

After a few hundred more feet of climbing beyond the junction, the Mt. Ida Trail breaks into the alpine. In early-morning and at dusk, be on the lookout for grazing elk and mule deer, and maybe even a bighorn sheep.

The views improve as the trail steadily climbs. Your scenery:

- West and northwest: Never Summer Range
- North: Specimen Mountain
- Northeast: Trail Ridge and Trail Ridge Road
- Beyond Trail Ridge: Mummy Range
- Distant southwest: Gore Range

After a subtle saddle at 12,000 feet, the ridge becomes increasingly rocky, with less mineral soil and tundra grasses. The unmaintained trail may be hard to track across rock fields, especially early in the season before the route has been reestablished by foot traffic and cairn-building hikers. When in doubt, stay on or to the slight west side of the ridge.

**Mt Ida Bypass (north end) ||** South of the 12,000-foot saddle, the Primary Route remains atop the high ridge for another 2.5 slow miles. If the weather is deteriorating or already uncooperative, drop to upper Timber Lake Creek from this saddle, and rejoin the Primary Route at Haynach Pass.

At the Mt. Ida summit, the trail stops. Scramble down tundra and talus to the saddle between Mt. Ida and Chief Cheley Peak, which is your next obstacle and which has a decidedly more talus-covered north face than Mt. Ida.

There is only thing worse than scrambling up talus: side-hilling across it. So get into a groove and take a direct line to the summit, which is capped with unique wind-sculpted quartz. Weather permitting, once there find a flat rock to enjoy the views and likely solitude: to the east, Gorge Lakes basin; to the west, upper Onahu Creek; plus most of the more distant views mentioned earlier.

After scrambling off the summit, talus-hop between scarce patches of tundra for another 600 yards. Stay on the Divide or just to its southwest until you can easily transition to the inviting and long-awaited tundra slope just below the ridge. This point is almost directly southeast of Chief Cheley Peak. You may descend earlier, but you will travel on talus for a similar distance.

Before mindlessly dropping elevation, observe Nakai Peak to the south-southwest. Between it and you is an out-of-view saddle, Haynach Pass, your next destination.

**Sprague Pass Alternate (north end) ||** The most efficient route to Bighorn Flats stays high

and parallels the Divide, skirting just a few hundred feet below Sprague Mountain. The Primary Route is longer and has more vertical change. However, it offers more oxygen, protection from the weather, and -- most importantly -- camping opportunities.

Descend on soft tundra, tracking due south, diagonal to the fall line. Skirt below a littering of large talus that comes off the Divide, and continue aiming towards Haynach Pass. The final 400 vertical feet are steeper and rockier, although easier than Chief Cheley Peak; use tundra tongues when possible to drop to Haynach Pass.

**Mt. Ida Bypass (south end) ||** Southbounders should rejoin the Primary Route at Haynach Pass. Northbounders who are facing unfavorable weather conditions or who plan to camp in upper Timber Creek should leave the Primary Route here.

At Haynach Pass, the travel improves. Descend a corridor of thin-soiled tundra that is littered with moraine and bounded by talus. As you approach the bottom of the Haynach Lakes bowl, tundra takes over.

On the east shore of Haynach Lakes, pick up the unmaintained Haynach Lakes Trail and follow it southeast towards Tonahutu Creek. Its mapped location is not exact, but you should have no problem following it once you find it.

## Continental Divide Trail

At the junction with the Tonahutu Creek Trail, the Pfiﬀner Traverse joins the Continental Divide Trail for the first time. The CDT extends from Mexico to Canada, roughly following the geographic Continental Divide. Its distance is oft-cited as 3,100 miles, but realistically it is several hundred miles less, not that it matters.

Each year, hundreds of backpackers hike the CDT from end-to-end, a journey that normally takes 4 to 6 months. Because it receives less use and passes through less populated areas, the CDT is considered more difficult than the Appalachian Trail and Pacific Crest Trails, which collectively make up the "Triple Crown" of long-distance backpacking.

**Continental Divide Trail Loop (north junction) ||** Section-hikers traveling in a clockwise direction join the Primary Route at this junction.

The next 9 miles of the Pfiﬀner Traverse, to the junction with the Lake Nanita Trail, follow high-use trails. This segment is part of an understandably popular all-trail itinerary, the Continental Divide Loop, one of the recommended Pfiﬀner Traverse section-hikes. The trail is well constructed and will be easy to follow, but inclement weather and thin air can still be problematic.

From the junction of Haynach Lakes Trail and Tonahutu Creek Trail, the route climbs steadily, breaking into the alpine around 11,200 feet. It remains very exposed until after the switchbacks above Hallet Creek, miles to the south. On Bighorn Flats, the most impressive views are behind you, of the Haynach Lakes drainage and, beyond, the Never Summer Range.

If you are working on a Colorado peak-bagging checklist, this section offers easy access to several 12,000-foot peaks, all walk-ups: Knobtop Mountain, Notchtop, Ptarmigan Point, Flattop, Hallet, and Otis.

**Sprague Pass Alternate (south end) ||** Southbounders should rejoin the Primary Route near the south end of Eureka Ditch. Northbounders who do not plan to camp in Tonahutu

Creek can avoid some vertical change and distance by leaving the Primary Route at about 12,000 feet and hiking north-northwest towards Sprague Pass.

After rounding Pt 12277, the views transition to the south and southwest: the Divide, Andrews Peak ridgeline, and Grand Lake and Shadow Mountain Lake. The summit block of Longs Peak, the only 14'er in Rocky Mountain National Park, looms above the skyline; a fuller view can be had from the summit of Hallet Peak. At Ptarmigan Pass, admire the corniced snowfield on the leeward side of the Divide that lingers late into the season, if not year-round.

At the trail junction west of Flattop Mountain, wake up your auto-pilot. Turn south and begin the gradual descent into Hallet Creek.

**Early-season ||** The switchbacks above Hallet Creek, which cut across a steep avalanche path multiple times, normally remain snow-covered into late-June or early-July. Unless the snow is crusted over, crampons and an axe are unnecessary for those comfortable on such terrain.

This section ends at the junction of North Inlet Trail and Lake Nanita Trail.

**Continental Divide Trail Loop (south junction) ||** Section-hikers traveling in a clockwise direction split from the Primary Route at this junction and continue downstream towards the North Inlet Trailhead.

## Andrews Peak

The Lake Nanita Trail is lower-use, since it dead-ends at Lake Nanita and does not service any camping areas. But it is excellently constructed, and the 1,400-foot climb goes by quickly.

The pristine and glacier-formed Lake Nokoni and Lake Nanita sit in deep bowls 1,500 vertical feet below the 12,000-foot ridge bookended by Ptarmigan Mountain and Andrews Peak. No doubt, the setting is worth the effort to get there.

**Andrews Peak Extra Credit ||** At the outlet of Lake Nokoni, those with energy to burn may depart the Primary Route to follow an even higher route along the Ptarmigan-Andrews ridge, which has stellar 360-degree views and a shockingly good game trail. The Primary Route is more varied but less airy. Northbounders should rejoin the Primary Route at the outlet of Lake Nokoni.

The most recent National Geographic Trails Illustrated map of the park shows the Lake Nanita Trail terminating at the namesake lake's southeast corner. In fact, it's increasingly faint beyond where it first reaches the lake, at its north shore; I suspect the remaining distance is used only by diehard fisherman, elk, and a few adventurous backpackers.

Beyond the southeast corner, use the inlet creek as a handrail and follow an intermittent elk trail near the forest edge, eventually reaching a grassy saddle northeast of Andrews Peak. Your next high point, Spirit Lake Pass, is visible to the southeast.

Pleasant tundra travel is interrupted by several hundred yards of talus and boulders at the low point between these two saddles. My notes describe it as some of the worst talus on the Pfiffner Traverse, probably due to its size. Starting at 11,000 feet, after the steep talus-covered pitch on the southeast side, find a strip of tundra along the base of a granite bluff on the northeast side of the tarn's outlet stream. Between the tarn and Spirit Lake Pass, the route is mostly talus-free.

## East Inlet

From Spirit Lake Pass or some other open spot in the alpine just below, scope the opposite side of the valley. Specifically, identify Isolation Peak and the low spot to its west, Isolation Peak Pass, your ticket to Paradise.

The descent into East Inlet is unsatisfying. It's not a natural route, with no handrails or consistent game trails. The best option is to simply descend through spruce/fir with the fall line (or on a bearing towards the east end of Spirit Lake). Use as a backstop the use trail that extends from Lake Verna (and the East Inlet Trail) to Fifth Lake; it skirts the north shore of Spirit Lake. If your path gets bluffed out, jog to the right or left and resume the descent. Thankfully, it's not a morass of blowdowns or overgrown understory -- I've worn shorts in both directions despite my pants being easily accessible at the top of my pack. That said, it's the closest thing to bushwhacking so far.

**Andrews Peak Extra Credit** || Southbounders should rejoin the Primary Route at the northeast corner of Spirit Lake. Northbounders should depart the Primary Route and follow the use trail west towards Lake Verna before turning north and grinding uphill.

After reaching the use trail, turn east and follow it towards Fifth Lake, a beautiful spot in the shadow of the Divide. The use trail through this rugged valley is not fast, but it's faster than not having one. Fourth Lake is shallow and surrounded by meadows. A short distance beyond, the trail enters a lushly vegetated meadow and may fade. Pick it back up where it climbs through light timber on the west side of Fifth Lake's outlet stream

From Fifth Lake, briefly follow the west shoreline before resuming the ascent up a slope of tundra, some of it soggy, aiming to the north/right of the cliff bands that encircle the southeast side of the bowl.

At 11,400 feet, where the route levels out, correctly identify the pass. It's not perfectly obvious from this vantage point, so take a bearing to confirm. The mapped tarns and outlet stream in these subtle draws may be difficult to locate -- they are shallow and low-volume. Finish the climb on hardpan tundra, perhaps with the assistance of an elk trail.

**In reverse** || First, eyeball Spirit Lake Pass, across East Inlet and to the right of Pt 12241. Second, take a bearing to Fifth Lake, which sits on a similar bearing as Longs Peak. Walk towards Longs until it's out of view, at which point the lake basin should be obvious.

## Paradise Park

The Natural Areas Act of 1977 established the Colorado Natural Areas Program (CNAP), which is managed by Colorado Parks & Wildlife and which seeks to "identify, evaluate, and support the protection of specific examples of natural features and phenomena as enduring resources for present and future generations" ([per CNAP](#)).

Paradise Park is one of the state's 93 Natural Areas. No trails access it, and no camping is permitted here. But the area is not off-limits, and the park does not discourage visitation. Per the park's Wilderness Coordinator:

"We minimize recreational developments and management activities in [Paradise Creek] to allow

natural process to predominate. This trail-less area is difficult to reach, but is open to public access for day use. Over camping is not allowed, to minimize human impacts on this special area.”

From Spirit Lake Pass, the boundary of Rocky Mountain National Park and the Indian Peaks Wilderness Area is visible across Paradise Creek. The gateway to upper Hell Canyon, Paradise Pass, is just out of view, to the east of Hiamovi Mountain.

Drop off the pass on tundra, picking your way through some rocks, and aim for the east side of the small tarn below. Funnel into the creek bed, staying on its west side, opposite the continuous berm of talus and boulders that guards the slopes of Isolation Peak. Follow an excellent game trail to a small tarn and elk wallows at 11,440 feet, at which point it would be possible to finally contour around the rocks.

**Ooh La La Extra Credit ||** Strong hikers who have favorable weather, who do not need a protected campsite within the next seven miles, and who are willing to rock-hop in exchange for airy ridges and views, can depart the Primary Route at the bottom edge of the talus.

Enter the open timber, which is braided with elk trails, and follow creeks southwest into the valley bottom. Paradise Creek is lined with interconnecting meadows that will be saturated into July and dew-covered on many summer mornings. It is useful to know the types of vegetation that grow in relatively dry and relatively wet areas. If you don't, you'll probably soon learn.

**In reverse ||** Begin the ascent to Spirit Lake Pass after reaching the large meadow at 10,540 feet with the small pond on its west side that sits immediately below a forested slope of granite bluffs. As an additional landmark, look for the meadow finger that juts north-northeast away from the larger meadow and pond. By walking along its edge, you can pick up the creek that doglegs north-northwest at the meadow.

Hike upstream through open forest and meadows, parallel to Paradise Creek along or near the forest edge. Paradise Pass is the obvious low spot on the ridge to the southeast. This vantage point may cause it to appear unrealistically steep.

From the base of Paradise Pass, it's an uninterrupted 700-foot push to the top. You may climb straight up it, avoiding the talus near the bottom by staying to the climber's left. But the elk seem to meander through the timber at the western base of the pass, before contouring east/left below some bluffs and then zig-zagging upwards on the tundra.

Paradise Pass marks the southern boundary of Rocky Mountain National Park. With an appropriate permit from Arapaho National Forest, camping is legal to the south. The spruce grove above Upper Lake offers the first protected spots, but there are some closer (albeit colder) alpine camps on the bench at 11,100 feet.

From the pass or just below it, absorb the view of upper Hell Canyon. And, when you're prepared to fall from cloud nine, identify your exit route. Cooper Peak Pass is directly across the valley on a southeast bearing, perched 300 vertical feet higher than Paradise Pass and 1,000 vertical feet above the valley floor.

Wander down tundra to the north shore of Upper Lake, which marks the end of Section 1 and beginning of Section 2. In mid-summer, the exceptionally lush tundra is blanketed with yellow avalanche lilies.

## Timber Creek Bypass

From the Timber Lake Trailhead, follow this popular trail to 10,800 feet, where Timber Creek doglegs towards Timber Lake. Here, join the Mt. Ida Bypass -- but don't expect to find any associated signage or to meet any other hikers who know about it!

**Rocky Mountain West ||** If traveling in the recommended clockwise direction, join the Timber Creek Bypass at the junction of Timber Lake Trail and Long Meadows Trail. Follow the Timber Lake Trail to the Mt. Ida Bypass, at the aforementioned dogleg-right in Timber Creek.

Two miles beyond the trailhead, there is an active landslide area. Inquire at the Visitor Center for current conditions. The detour sounds unpleasant relative to the rest of the trail ("arduous and exceptionally difficult...NOT recommended for those who have difficulty with wilderness OFF TRAIL travel," per NPS signage), but it's probably good training for what lies ahead.

## Beaver Creek Bypass

From Milner Pass, walk southwest on Trail Ridge Road, being careful of traffic and inattentive drivers. Ideally, avoid this road-walk entirely, and instead start (or finish) at the pullout a half-mile down the road. There's no overnight parking at the pullout or the day-use area just before it.

Leave the road and hop across the willow-lined creek. Turn south and contour through timber until the fall-line becomes south-southwest. You may lose elevation during the contour, but avoid getting pulled into the creek bed. As the gradient mellows, change course: hike southeast until reaching Beaver Creek.

Using Beaver Creek as a handrail, travel upstream in a southwest and then south direction until reaching the grassy 11,200-foot saddle between the Divide and Jackstraw Mountain. Here, join the Mt. Ida Bypass, following it east to the Divide or south into upper Timber Creek, depending on your intentions.

The Beaver Creek Bypass is a route you have to do, not one that you want to do: it connects points of interest, but offers little standalone value. Views are scarce; game trails are intermittent; and the blowdowns and bogs are annoying. Moreover, it's difficult to parallel the V-shaped creek bottom without being pulled into it.

## Mt. Ida Bypass

From the subtle 12,000-foot saddle on the Mt. Ida Trail, leave the Divide and descend west on a broad tundra slope with scattered krumholtz. Aim for the grassy saddle below Jackstraw Mountain and at the head of Beaver Creek.

**Beaver Creek Bypass (south end) ||** If you have followed this alternate route from Milner Pass, join the Mt. Ida Bypass at this saddle. If you plan to reach Milner Pass via Beaver Creek, drop north from here.

Descend south towards Timber Creek, using the Timber Creek Trail as a backstop. The open meadows are tempting but may be waterlogged; if so, cut through the open timber. Ideally, hit the trail at around 10,880 feet at the northeast end of a meadow.

**Timber Lake Bypass (south end) ||** Southbounders who started their hike from Timber Lake Trailhead should join the Mt. Ida Bypass on the Timber Lake Trail at 10,880 feet. Northbounders who departed the Primary Route at Haynach Pass and intend to finish at Timber Lake Trailhead should follow the trail downhill to Trail Ridge Road. Northbounders who intend to finish via Beaver Creek should leave the trail to the north and climb 400 vertical feet to the saddle at the head of Beaver Creek.

Follow the Timber Lake Trail to the outlet of Timber Lake. A use trail continues along the southwest shore into the basin below Timber Lake Pass, fading as the route gets wetter and then rockier.

Several important landmarks are visible from Timber Lake Pass, including Julian Lake and Haynach Pass, where this bypass route rejoins the Primary Route. The bottom of Onahu Creek is out-of-sight, but its location is obvious.

Three options exist for the descent. The most straightforward is to drop off the pass into the bowl below. The extensive talus at the bottom is intimidating, but a source tells me that the route is "fairly quick, stable and easy." YMMV.

Until I can vouch for that, my recommendation is to wrap around the bowl on its west ridge until finding a feasible path down. One proven option is a steep chute along the east-facing promontory that leads to Julian Lake, although it may be difficult to scout this line from above. The elk prefer an easier route further south along the ridge, dropping east through timber-lined chutes from the 11,400-foot saddle. Note: If you take this final route, it will be more efficient to skip the checkpoint at Julian Lake.

From the lake outlet, hike east through tundra and meadows until reaching the small creek that originates below Chief Cheley Peak. Use it as a handrail through the timber until reaching the pleasant meadow at the bottom of Onahu Creek.

It's an 800-foot grind through open forest, tundra, and some moraine to Haynach Pass. To limit inefficient meandering through the timber before the pass is within sight, take a bearing before beginning the climb.

## **Sprague Pass Alternate**

Officially, this route begins at the Divide, but realistically it follows the Primary Route to about 12,240 feet, at the lower edge of a talus field, before parting ways.

The route to the 12,000-foot saddle west-northwest of Sprague Mountain is mostly covered in lumpy tundra. Lichen-covered rocks are scattered throughout, sometimes in groups or bands.

On the approach to the saddle, 12,713-foot Sprague Mountain looms large on the Divide. This rockpile can be bypassed on its west side, by using the obvious bench and then contouring (with some descending) into the 11,700-foot saddle on Sprague's south side.

Find Eureka Ditch, which was excavated in 1902 to send more water to the semi-arid Front Range, and follow it gradually uphill towards the Tonahutu Trail and the Primary Route. Stick to the ditch's east side -- the downhill side is wetter and more vegetated

## Andrews Peak Extra Credit

From the outlet of Lake Nokoni, climb northwest on firm tundra, leaving the subalpine spruce/fir behind, towards the low spot on the ridge below Pt 11733. Follow a good elk trail for the final pitch.

The northeast ridge of Pt 11733 is covered in talus, and unfortunately it's a 500-foot scramble to its top. It remains rocky until the saddle on its southwest side. The ground cover is friendlier thereafter, with light tundra and rocks extending to the 11,520-foot tarn on the opposite end of this alternate.

**Alternate ascent route** || I have also gained the ridge by climbing up the steep bowl immediately southeast of Ptarmigan Mountain, starting from the north shore of Lake Nanita. It looks better from below. Out of view is an extended section of assorted talus, and the very steep headwall is covered in light tundra and ball-bearing gravel.

Find the game trail -- made by elk or sheep, or both -- as shown on the map, and follow it for about 1.5 miles. It's continuous, but on occasion it does fade and braid. The views to the south are consistently good, but the more impressive sights are to the north: Lake Nokoni and Nanita far below, the North Inlet valley, and the Divide.

This blissful ridgewalk ends at the idyllic tarn at 11,520 feet. Here, you must settle on a descent route into East Inlet. To extend the alpine experience, try contouring towards Spirit Lake Pass around the south side of Pt 12241, giving up 400-500 vertical feet along the way. Start on granite slabs with tundra benches and ramps, and transition to talus and timber. Join the Primary Route below Spirit Lake Pass, before dropping into East Inlet. I have not tried this route but would like to check it out.

The proven route descends tundra slopes between granite bluffs to the dome outcrop at 10,920 feet. At the saddle on its north side, turn east before resuming the descent through steeper timber. If impassible blowdowns, vertical bluffs, or uncomfortably angled slabs are encountered, jog left or right and try again.

A use trail follows the north shores of Lake Verna (from the terminus of the East Inlet Trail), Spirit Lake, and Fourth Lake. It acts as a convenient backstop to your descent. Upon reaching the trail, turn east and follow it to the northeast corner of Spirit Lake, where you will rejoin the Primary Route.

**In reverse** || From the northeast corner of Lake Verna, climb up the fall line, angling left whenever straight is not an option. After 800 vertical feet, the timber will thin and your visibility will improve, making it easier to contour and climb to the tarn at 11,520 feet.

## Ooh La La Extra Credit

From the small pool and elk wallows at 11,440 feet, leave the Primary Route and skirt east, below the edge of the boulder field. Contour on pleasant tundra benches with a slight diagonal ascent, up to about 11,600.

Your route to the Divide comes into full view. After crossing the lower lip of a bowl south-southwest of Isolation Peak, hike to the base of a break in the cliffs that leads to a steep tundra slope. Alternatively, gain the top of the cliffs at their north side.

The Divide offers relatively good walking, mostly on tundra and lichen-covered rocks. Be certain to

turn north for a view of Longs Peak; from this angle, The Notch is especially noticeable.

Climb gradually towards Ogalalla Peak, the summit of which requires a short side-trip. Ogalalla and Point 13049 sit on the boundary between Rocky Mountain National Park and the Indian Peaks Wilderness Area. Peak over the eastern edge of Pt 13049 for views of the St. Vrain Glaciers, which are remarkably smaller than suggested by the topo map and by photos in Roach's 1998 guidebook. Remain on the edge to Pt 12945 (aka Ooh La La Peak), which is cleaner than its west slope.

From Ooh La La Peak, the route should be straightforward, although I haven't done it myself. Stay high on the ridge, skirting the upper edge of the Island Lake basin. Before beginning the final descent to Gourd Lake from Pt 12059, scout Thunderbolt Creek, where the Piffner Traverse will get exciting again after a few easy trail miles.

From Pt 12059, an alternative route descends to Fox Park in upper Buchanan Creek. It's certainly more engaging; but it's marginally longer, and for northbounders it's a more abrupt climb. Based on Landsat imagery, from Point 12059 the elk drop to about 11,400 feet and contour along and through the timber to Point 12059's southeast ridge, which can be descended to the creek.

## Section 2: Lone Eagle

The Indian Peaks Wilderness Area is one of the most popular in the country, due to its National Park-worthy mountain scenery and its proximity to Front Range population centers. But the upper headwaters of Arapaho Creek -- including Roaring Fork, Buchanan Creek, Cascade Creek -- are among its least visited, and the Piffner Traverse maintains an even greater sense of wilderness with a rugged pass-and-valley route that is largely off-trail.

The section's centerpiece is Lone Eagle Peak, a Colorado icon that stands proud over Mirror and Crater Lakes. This can't-miss landmark is hard won, however: it's a big climb out of the Lone Eagle Cirque, and then a big drop on the other side to Lost Tribe Lakes and then Coyote Park.

## Hell Canyon

The Primary Route spends too little time in Hell Canyon, due to topographic limitations. Offset this shortcoming by spending a night here, or at least by having lunch and resting your legs.

**Marten Saddle Alternate (north end) ||** An 11,000-foot saddle southwest of Marten Peak offers a more protected route between Upper Lake and Gourd Lake. It's lower than the Primary Route, but probably no faster, since it's longer and has more vertical change.

// Cooper Peak Pass route

**Ooh La La Extra Credit ||** Rejoin the Primary Route at the outlet of Gourd Lake, unless you opt for the Fox Park finish, in which case rejoin the Primary Route where the Buchanan Creek Trail drops to Thunderbolt Creek.

**Cooper Peak Alternate ||** Rejoin the Primary Route at the outlet of Gourd Lake, after following the lake's east shore.

A social trail dips and bobs around the east shore of Gourd Lake, passing several small campsites. The outlet stream may be mapped incorrectly: rather than flowing south-southeast, I believe it flows west into the phallic pond. A logjam marks the outlet.

**Marten Peak Alternate (south end) ||** Southbounders should rejoin the Primary Route on the south side of the logjam. Northbounders who want a more protected (but less scenic) route to Gourd Lake should leave the Primary Route at the logjam.

## Buchanan Creek

From the south side of the logjam at the south tip of Gourd Lake, the Gourd Lake Trail heads west. After a series of painfully low-angle switchbacks, it T-bones into the Buchanan Pass Trail. At 9,600 feet, this junction is one of the lowest spots on the entire Pfiﬀner Traverse. It is immediately west of a large avalanche path, and not properly located on the USFS base map.

**Double Bypass Section-Hike (north junction) ||** If you are hiking counterclockwise, depart the Primary Route at the junction of Buchanan Pass Trail and Gourd Lake Trail, and follow the Buchanan Trail downhill. If you are hiking clockwise, join the Primary Route here.

**Paiute Pass and Lone Eagle Cirque Bypass ||** The next two passes on the Pfiﬀner Traverse are its most difficult, in terms of route-finding, technical grade, and vertical change per horizontal distance. Southbounders can bypass one or both of these obstacles by following an all-trail and mostly view-less route to the west. Northbounders should rejoin the Primary Route at this junction.

After less than a mile on the Buchanan Pass Trail, an unmarked side trail departs southward and crosses Buchanan Creek, just upstream of its (not visible) confluence with Thunderbolt Creek. If you cross Buchanan Creek on the official trail, you have gone too far.

**Triple Bypass Section-Hike (north junction) ||** If you are hiking counterclockwise, join the Primary Route at this unmarked junction, which is just downstream of the switchbacks between Fox Park and the Buchanan/Thunderbolt confluence, shortly after the trail fords to the north side of Buchanan Creek.

## Thunderbolt Creek

The unmarked side trail crosses Buchanan Creek, which may have multiple shallow braids during periods of higher runoff, and enters Thunderbolt Meadow, the edge of which hosts several established campsites. The view up-valley is grand but not instructive: Paiute Pass can be seen at the head of this U-shaped valley, but the route to it is unclear.

From the large established camp on the very edge of the meadow, follow a use trail just inside the treeline until it disappears in a slide path. Beyond the slide, travel in the timber is hindered by blowdowns. Instead, follow the eastern edge of the meadow, hopping into the woods when necessary to avoid standing water (assuming your shoes aren't soaked already from dew or precip). At the meadow's southeastern edge, follow a faint trail through the forest for several minutes, until arriving at the first avalanche runout zone, which originates on the east wall above the head of the meadow.

The trail exits the timber and steps over two logs, one with an upstream arrow engraved on it, and then veers towards the creek. After stumbling across the toe of a rock slide, the trail disappears in meadow grasses. Enter a flood zone with riparian vegetation that will be waist-high in July, shoulder-high in August and frost-killed in September. Beware of rocks, blowdowns, and avy debris lurking below the surface, and then in plain sight during the final stretch across the runout zone.

Aim for the treeline about 50 yards east/left of the cascading waterfall, and just left of a very tall snag

(if it's still standing), at the base of a ledgy cliff system. A faint game trail enters the timber, scrambles through the first cliff band, and climbs diagonally towards the creek. Ascend through another cliff band, and perhaps one more, always jogging towards the creek between breaks. It's light bushwhacking with Class 2 scrambles.

The trail pulls next to the creek at the base of a 20-foot waterfall, which roars with spring runoff, before climbing through one more notable cliff band next to the falls. Above it, parallel the creek until reaching another avalanche runout zone.

This next section is cleaner and less particular than the last -- there is less vegetation and more route options. After pushing through the meadow, zig-zag upwards on grassy ramps, granite slabs, benches, and some talus -- still on the east side of Thunderbolt Creek, though not necessarily as close to it -- until arriving at Paiute Lake, a mid-route highlight. The lake's outlet area has sufficient room for a shelter or two.

Side-hill around the eastern edge of Paiute Lake, and leave it after a one-move Class 3 scramble on a short ledge. A pack-lift might be helpful for some. Climb south-ish on tundra, slabs, and talus to a small flat at treeline, which would make for a comfortable high camp. Follow the main creek to the base of Paiute Pass.

## **Paiute Pass**

There are at least two proven routes to Paiute Pass. The direct route aims for the true pass. Later in the season, it entails a moderate slope of mostly stable scree and talus that funnels into a steeper talus-filled gully. But the route is more difficult in early-season conditions: the base is snow-covered, and the gully holds a snow tongue with a maximum angle of about 40 degrees.

From the bowl below the pass, the alternative route scrambles to the right/southwest, in order to get above a cliff system. Then, it zig-zags on tundra and granite ledges to the ridge, arriving about 25 yards west of the true pass.

The alternate route melts out before the direct route -- it holds less snow and receives more sunshine. But when snow-covered it's the more hazardous of the two routes, due to the relatively worse consequences of a non-arrested slip.

In a normal year, the direct route will hold snow through June and be effectively melted out by August. The alternate route is about two weeks ahead. This timeline could shift by up to a month after extremely dry or wet winters, and after extremely cool or warm springs.

While atop Paiute Pass, be sure to locate the west ridge of the Lone Eagle Cirque and the Northeast Gully. For south-bounders, that feature (along with its approach) represents the next significant challenge. The route will look impossibly steep, which it's not; from here, the more important takeaway is the amount of snow still lingering in the gully.

I do not recommend descending south or southeast from the true pass. Instead, if the direct route was taken to the pass, head west on the ridge for about 25 yards, contouring around an outcrop and passing by a bold ridgetop campsite along the way. Stop where krumholtz spruce grow up to the ridge. If the alternate route was taken to the pass, descend to the lowest krumholtz spruce.

Drop south off the pass, veering right/west down craggy ledges, until reaching a tundra-covered avalanche chute. Descend it for about 200 vertical feet. When it becomes clear that the chute plummets over cliffs, halt. Turn left/east through krumholtz and find a tundra-filled crack system on a 175-degree bearing. Drop down it until you're below the lowest cliff band.

To reach the Pawnee Pass Trail, hike south-southwest along the base of the wall to a large grass-covered avalanche path. (A more direct route through the timber is complicated by steep granite bluffs.) Follow it into the meadow at the base of the valley. Pick up the Pawnee Pass Trail on the south side of the meadow.

**In reverse** || From the south, Paiute Pass looks intimidating. It's very steep, and it's difficult to identify the exact pass (it's to the east of the ridgetop krumholtz) or the most practical line to it. The perspective improves if you are willing to hike beyond its base, towards the outlet of Pawnee Lake, although that's not necessary. One potential line climbs an avalanche slope before cutting right/east along a timbered ledge to a higher grass-covered slope, which connects to the ridge. This route goes, but I think overall the best route is to follow the guidebook description in reverse: ascend the avalanche slope to the base of the wall, then follow it uphill until you identify the broken crack system at the 175-degree bearing.

**Triple Bypass Section-Hike (south junction)** || If you are hiking counterclockwise, leave the Primary Route after reaching the Pawnee Pass Trail. If you are hiking clockwise, leave the Pawnee Pass Trail at the meadow at 10,750 feet.

Follow the trail downstream to its junction with the Cascade Creek Trail, which climbs to Crater Lake.

**Lone Eagle Cirque Bypass** || If Paiute Pass was overwhelming, the next section will be no better. To bypass it, descend the Pawnee Pass Trail towards Monarch Lake.

## Lone Eagle Cirque

The Northeast Gully is the easiest non-trail exit from the iconic Lone Eagle Cirque, but it's still the most difficult feature on the Pfiffner Traverse: it's filled with snow through mid-summer, covered with talus and loose scree in late-summer, and always steep. Unfortunately, it's also a critical connector between Lone Eagle Cirque, Lost Tribe Lakes, and upper Arapaho Creek.

To reach the Lone Eagle Cirque, follow the Cascade Creek Trail south from its junction with the Pawnee Pass Trail. This rugged trail will pass by:

- Mirror Lake, which affords a spectacular view of Lone Eagle;
- Crater Lake, from where the Northeast Gully and its approach route can be seen; and,
- Multiple designated campsites, permits for which are available from Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest.

The Northeast Gully and its approach can be divided into three parts. The first starts at campsite #12, where there is a century-old and roofless log cabin perched on a granite bluff above Crater Lake. From here, your goal is to reach the base of Mt. Achonee, along which there is a steep vegetated ramp that can be followed to the bowl below the Northeast Gully. This route is hardly a breeze, but it at least avoids the impassable cliff bands to the west/southwest of Crater Lake.

A use trail departs from the back of campsite #12. Follow it for a few minutes, until it drops towards

Crater Lake. It terminates shortly beyond, when thick brush and short cliffs block travel along the shoreline.

Climb up a moderately angled slope (relatively speaking) to the base of the wall. There's no perfect route: the meadows are often wet, and brush and overgrowth hide rocks and deadfall; the timber is littered with blowdowns; and the granite slabs can be steep and ledgy. But at least it's short.

West-southwest of Crater Lake, there is a small basin that is rimmed by Point 12130 and Point 12155. Strive to reach the wall near its outlet stream. If this drainage is dry, which may be the case later in the season, look for the varnish stain on the wall's lower slabs.

The second segment is more straightforward. Grind steeply upwards along the base of the wall on firm tundra, talus, and one rocky riparian section. When the grade begins to mellow after about 800 vertical feet, leave the base of the wall and aim towards the base of the Northeast Gully, mostly on slabs with some tundra. Talus can be mostly avoided by staying downhill of it.

## **Northeast Gully**

The Northeast Gully is not the narrow slot that tops out at the low spot on the ridge between Achonee and Hopi. It's also not the wide slope at the base of Hopi. Instead, it's the medium-sized chute between them. When it's snow-filled, the maximum slope angle at the top is about 45 degrees -- it's steep.

After a normal winter, the Northeast Gully will remain snow-filled through June. Rocks begin to show in July. And it's a pure rock scramble by August. Depending on the winter snowfall and spring temperatures, this timeline may shift by up to a month.

Based on first-hand experience with this route and others, I expect that the scree and talus becomes generally less stable towards the top of the chute, where the slope angle is increasingly greater than the angle of repose. The rocks are free to move for 2-3 months per year; otherwise, they are locked in unstable positions by snow and ice.

## **Lost Tribe Lakes**

After reaching the top of the Northeast Gully, turn left/south and scramble atop the ridgeline towards Hopi on lichen-covered talus that is slick when wet. This extra climbing will avoid a tedious and lengthy contour across endless talus. At the subtle low spot between Point 12707 and Hopi, descend southwest down a narrow tundra corridor.

At around 12,200 feet, transition to windswept tundra, and begin to hug the western lip of the Lost Tribe Lakes basin to scout a route down. It's also a good vantage point from which to identify some of the route between Lost Tribe Lakes and Wheeler Basin. A corniced snowfield builds below this ridgeline, which limits descent options early in the season.

Follow an elk trail that drops off the ridge and hooks left/north around the edge and bottom of the snowfield (or would-be snowfield). You have missed the trail if you reach a large boulder on the ridgeline. At the bottom of the descent, turn right/south and follow it across and through scree and small talus. Beyond, the trail continues to the head of the lower Lost Tribe Lake and to the outlet of the upper lake, although on the tundra it's more faint and less crucial.

Given the difficulties in reaching Lost Tribe Lakes -- which sit at treeline and which are surrounded by imposing cliffs below Hopi, Point 12799, Mt George, and Apache Peak -- it's likely to be unoccupied. Enjoy your stay.

## **Wheeler Basin descent**

The optimal route between Lost Tribe Lakes and Wheeler Basin, a hanging valley above Arapaho Creek, is still a mystery to me, even after four attempts at finding one.

From the outlet of the upper Lost Tribe Lake, hike east, gaining some elevation to avoid the wet southeast shoreline of the upper Lost Tribe Lake. After a few minutes, turn southeast and aim for the saddle at the base of Mt George; the knob on the saddle's southwest side is just 80 feet higher.

One proven descent route uses the second avalanche chute southeast of the saddle. The upper portion is steep but mostly tundra-covered; the bottom is mellower but rockier. Below the normal run-out zone, aim for healthy timber, not the thickets of mangled spruce. However you get down, enter the lush meadow at the bottom of Wheeler Basin and arrive at the creek-side campsite that is marked on the topo map.

I'm hopeful that there is a cleaner route to the west of this avalanche chute, but I'm not certain there is. Try dropping into the first avalanche chute beyond the saddle, and then working right/southwest through breaks in the ledges. This route may be easier to find in the reverse direction: Slightly downstream of the campsite there is a well established elk trail that climbs up along the left side of the wall. Start there, and then work right/northeast through the ledges.

## **Wheeler Basin**

From the campsite, follow a use trail to Coyote Park in upper Arapaho Creek. It starts on the south side of Wheeler Creek, crosses to the north side further downstream, and then fords again near the mouth of this hanging valley. It is generally easy to follow to this point.

Below the final ford, the trail becomes more obscure, due to a thicker understory and multiple blowdowns. But stay on the trail -- it's still faster than descending to Arapaho Creek and climbing the opposite slope to gain the Arapaho Pass Trail. After dropping to a low elevation of 10,040 feet, it climbs gradually, parallel to the creek about 100 yards away.

Upon reaching an unmapped avalanche run-out zone, the use trail becomes extremely difficult to find or follow. Do your best, and push through to the timber on the other side.

Soon the use trail arrives at the edge of another run-out zone, at the northern end of Coyote Park. Depart the "trail" and descend to the creek, which can be crossed on a logjam, or boulder-hopped later in the season. Hike uphill away from the creek until intersecting the Arapaho Pass Trail, within about 25 or 50 yards. The location of the trail is mapped incorrectly -- it is closer to the creek than shown.

## **Upper Arapaho**

## **Marten Saddle Alternate**

From the north shore of Upper Lake, follow the east shoreline, climb a short rise, and drop to Stone Lake. By the north corner of Stone Lake, you should have picked up the Roaring River Trail. Follow it a short distance, until you can follow a south-southwest bearing over the outlet stream and towards the low ridge beyond. From the top of this ridge, descend a short ways before resuming a moderate climb (on a diagonal) to the saddle between Marten Peak and Pt 11361.

The meadows south of this saddle are beloved by elk. Stay quiet and you might see some. Descend southeast to about 10,600 feet, until you can skirt below the bottom of a talus field. Turn west and hike through open timber, using elk trails when convenient, eventually reaching Gourd Lake, the outlet of which is marked by a log jam and a good view of Cooper Peak.

## **Paiute Pass Bypass**

## **Lone Eagle Cirque Bypass**

## **Section 3: Atop the Backbone**

From Columbine Lake Pass, located just a few miles into this section, the Pfiffner Traverse climbs towards the Continental Divide, and then remains generally atop it for the next 23 miles, to Berthoud Pass. The travel is easy to moderate, but the altitude and exposure can be wearisome, especially towards the end when the route links the summits of five 13,000-foot peaks: James, Bancroft, Parry, Eva, and Flora.

For north-bounders, this section will be the final highlight of your journey. For south-bounders, it will set the tone for everything that lies ahead.

## **Columbine**

## **Devils Thumb**

## **Rollins Pass**

## **13'ers**

## **Cool down (or Warm Up)**

## **Cabinet Creek Low Route**

## **Riflesight Low Route**

## Fall River Low Route